

Summary

Title: Operation Paramount – a partnership response to the challenges around identification and support for children affected by parental incarceration

Scanning: Parental incarceration is a recognised risk factor for young people, leading to observed adversity in adult life. There has been extensive research on the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) across the world, which has seen a growing trend for statutory agencies, including the police, to mitigate their effects in the hope of reducing demand including future criminality. Of the recognised ACEs, only the imprisonment of a family member and the loss of a parent/carer are not generally available through existing data.

In the United Kingdom, there is currently no statutory mechanism to identify children affected by parental incarceration, despite extensive data collection and sharing by criminal justice agencies.

Analysis: Existing datasets provide criminal justice agencies with the ability to identify people who have entered and left the prison estate. By combining this data with other routinely available data on child protection concerns and domestic abuse incidents held by the police, criminal justice organisations can, for the first time, identify young people affected by parental imprisonment within hours of the event taking place.

Response: During 2021, Thames Valley Police designed and launched “Operation Paramount”, a partnership operation consisting of two stages. In stage one, police analysts run a process monthly to combine available data from criminal justice

agencies to identify young people who may have been affected by parental imprisonment. Research and intelligence checks are then carried out, including with statutory partners such as social care, to identify any immediate critical safeguarding risks. In stage two, a call is made to the family by police, who seek permission to carry out a visit with the family to assess their needs and discuss available support. A key objective of this visit is to discuss the support available from a dedicated charity, who specialise in this field with services from in-house social care support to workshops and support groups.

Assessment: Between Nov 21 and Nov 22, 350 children were identified through the Op Paramount mechanism, with 40 referred for further support*. Case studies carried out on young people who were referred found significant increases in wellbeing, and a decrease in policing contacts. With a pilot still running in Thames Valley Police, a further four areas have now begun pilots, with specific evaluations running from a UK (United Kingdom) University and the Ministry of Justice.

Description

A. Scanning:

How was the problem identified?

In 2019 whilst trying to support a victim of criminal exploitation, we met the head of a local charity who support children affected by parental imprisonment. At the end of our meeting, the CEO informed us that there was no statutory mechanism to identify children affected by parental imprisonment, as the child in our case had been.

This surprised us. Despite all the administration, the pre-sentencing reports, the multi-agency working, there was no reliable way of us being able to identify when a parent going into prison would affect a child.

As we began to research, we quickly found that this was true, and had previously been highlighted by several national reports, including Crest Advisory's 2019 report:

“There is no national guidance around recognising children of prisoners as a distinct group of children in need, and the absence of any mechanism to notify schools or the local authority when a parent enters custody will in most cases mean that the event goes unnoticed. Instead, the system unduly relies on children and parents self-identifying to services.” (Kincaid, Roberts and Kane (2019). p.8. Children of Prisoners: Fixing a broken system.)

This is ultimately where Op Paramount originated. A recognition that there was an unmet need, in the form of a lack of accurate identification, and an opportunity to explore public health policing and data sharing through the formation of the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit (TVVRU).

Nature of the problem:

Parental incarceration is a recognised risk factor for young people, leading to observed adversity in adult life. There has been extensive research on the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) across the world, which has seen a growing trend for statutory agencies to mitigate their effects in the hope of reducing demand including future criminality.

In 2018 the UK government published the [Serious Violence Strategy](#) and funded a series of Violence Reduction Units across England and Wales with the explicit goal of reducing public spaces violence amongst children and young people.

The team started to assess available data which highlighted children who may be affected by their circumstances and/or the behaviours of the adults who care for them. Some of these were immediately apparent through police data, such as records of children who were victims or abuse or neglect or witnesses to the abuse of a sibling or parent. Others could be used to indicate a perceived risk such as a parent or carer being found in possession of drugs or being supported in mental health crisis. In fact, of the [10 widely recognised ACEs](#), only the imprisonment of a family member and the loss of a parent/carer through separation, divorce or death aren't generally available through existing police data.

The separation or divorce of parents/caregivers was immediately apparent of being outside the control or remit of the police, but we recognised that the police often play a significant part in the imprisonment of parents, albeit we are only responsible for the recording and investigation of offences as opposed to the actual sentencing or imprisonment itself.

This information formed the basis of the scanning for Op Paramount. We needed to know what existing protocols were in place for identifying children affected by parental imprisonment and whether there was existing data to enable this process.

There have been several national papers published highlighting the absence of data in affected children as well as some estimates on the number of children affected:

“There are 312,000 incidents per year of a child losing a parent to custody in England and Wales, 17,000 of which as a result of mothers being sent to prison... However, with no formal process in place to systematically identify the children of prisoners, there is actually no central record of who these children are.” *(Kincaid, Roberts and Kane (2019). p.8. [Children of Prisoners: Fixing a broken system](#). Crest Advisory*

Alongside the other recognised ACE's, the impacts of a lack of support following parental imprisonment can be severe and far-reaching and there is established research around the impact of parental imprisonment on children. 65% of boys with an imprisoned father go on to offend (Kincaid, Roberts and Kane, 2019).

Why this problem and not another?

The Violence Reduction Unit are no strangers to using data to identify risk factors for future adversity – it is a key reason for us existing and something we work closely with partners to do.

This was however a different “problem” to tackling risk factors than we are used to having to address. The “response” to our problem (children affected by parental imprisonment) was well understood and a solution (Children Heard and Seen) ready

to spring into action, our “problem” here were the challenges in identifying those with the “problem” to begin with.

Op Paramount has never been exercised in isolation, but rather as a demonstrable use case for appropriate sharing of partnership data for public good. This work relies upon innovative data sharing and technologies to identify children linked to adult offending and safeguarding data. By demonstrating a tangible benefit for children who would be otherwise at risk of additional harm we can show the clear benefits of developing further innovation from police and partnership data.

Why is it “our” problem?

Policing frequently finds itself in conflict around what we “own” as a problem. As a team we spoke at length early on in the process about whether we were the right agency to be leading on this problem solving. We came to the following conclusions:

1. We have the best access (at the moment) to the data we would need
2. The “solution” is not a police one, and would not cause significant additional demand
3. Inaction may fuel a legitimacy issue which would affect us and our ability to protect the public
4. We may not need to be involved forever – see assessment!

B. Analysis:

Initial dataset

We wanted to answer the following question:

“Can we identify who, on a monthly or more frequent basis, goes into prison, and how many of these individuals may be linked to a young person”.

To answer the first part of this question, we recognised we needed an external dataset that would identify movement within the prison estate, e.g., who has entered or left prison in a given time period. For some time, His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) have given police forces access to a system called NOMIS, which consists of the movement of individuals into, within, and out of the secure estate in the United Kingdom. This dataset is most frequently used by police and probation services to identify people who are leaving prison who require additional management.

Following a discussion with colleagues, we were able to utilise a searching tool to carry out a different search that would identify those who had entered the prison estate between specified dates. As a result, we ended with a reproducible dataset that could be obtained at any specified frequency, that would identify who entered the prison estate from within the Thames Valley area, regardless of which prison they ended up in.

Now that we had our list of persons who had entered the prison estate, we needed to establish whether they had any links to children recorded, who may be affected by their imprisonment. To answer this, we carried out research on our crime and

incident recording system NICHE to understand how children are linked to adults, and how we would be able to use this data at scale.

Police in the Thames Valley collect information on the relationships between children and adults in a number of different scenarios:

1. When a child is involved in an incident (for example as a victim of crime) we commonly record details of their next of kin to help manage the investigation.
2. We have a national project that runs in the Thames Valley called Op Encompass, which notifies schools when a young people may have been witness to a domestic abuse incident at their home. As a result of this work, we have increasingly good recording of parents linked to children, where a domestic abuse incident has been recorded.
3. For wider child protection and intelligence processing, we will record links between children and parents as part of efforts to keep children and the wider public safe.

We therefore wrote a query that takes the output from the first “who has entered prison” query, and searches for any links between these adults and any children.

We then wrote a script that combines these two outputs, removes any duplicates, and presents the information in a clear consistent format, ready for it to be assessed and secondary checks to be made on the information.

We had, for the first time, an automated method to identify those children who had been affected by parental imprisonment!

Initial findings

Between November 2021 and November 2022, the data process identified 343 children across the Thames Valley who were likely impacted by the recent imprisonment of a parent.

56% of these children were of primary school age (between the ages of 5-11), with 22% early years and pre-school (ages 0-4), and 21% were aged twelve or over. 53% of the children were male.

95% of identified young people were affected by the imprisonment of a male parent.

Limitations to the process/data

The current process relies heavily on the quality and completeness of person-to-person relationships that link children and adults in our crime recording system.

Whilst this information has improved substantially as a result of projects like Operation Encompass, it is still likely to under-report young people, as not all young people will be linked on Niche to their parent.

One enhancement we plan to make is utilising a method of creating these links between children and adults using social network analysis. Where adults may be linked to an occurrence alongside a child on multiple occasions, a method called bipartite network creation can be used to infer these links between adults and children. This method would likely increase the numbers of young people we are able to identify who are linked to a parent through shared involvement in the same events.

We could also look to utilise other partners' data to help identify relationships between adults and children. Whilst currently the data used is limited to police only data, social care organisations hold a much more extensive set of information about

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the relationships between adults and children. Partnership data programmes such as [Thames Valley Together](#) would offer the opportunity to share this data securely and use it as part of the Op Paramount data process.

C. Response:

From the outset of Operation Paramount, it was clear that there were two main project goals:

- The accurate identification of children within the Thames Valley who had had a parent or primary carer sentenced to a term of imprisonment.
- And, the ability to signpost those children and their remaining parent/carers to support to help them mitigate for and reduce the harms known to be caused by parental imprisonment.

It was less clear how we could appropriately measure against these goals as we were not able to compare an existing accurate data set for children, hence the nature of our unique problem. That said, we knew that there was an estimated cohort from the 2019 CREST Advisory research of 312,000 across the UK and we ran an initial back-dated check for the county of Oxfordshire for the year up to our launch in November 2021 which gave an approximate 50 children a year.

We soon realised that any reliable and regular identification process, based in fact from HMPPS data would represent an achieved goal, if only to be able to add some evidence to existing national estimates.

Our ability to be able to offer support to affected children and families was, theoretically, easier to manage as it appeared to be within our control as a police service; if we were able to produce a dataset of affected children largely using existing police data then maybe we could procure suitable resources to make an offer of support.

An easier decision to make was who to approach as our delivery partner. Children Heard and Seen (CHandS) is a charity which provides support and interventions for children with a parent in prison. The charity was set up in 2014, with a focus on reducing intergenerational offending, and mitigating the impacts of parental imprisonment. They provide interventions to children and young people of prisoners, ensuring children are supported as well as offering additional support for their parents and the partners of prisoners.

Children Heard and Seen are based in Oxfordshire with a successful track record for partnership working. They are also unique in the UK in that they are wholly community based. This means that children do not have to visit their imprisoned parent to access support and are correctly recognised as having agency over their visitation choices and not denied support in cases where they cannot do not wish to visit prisons.

This led to one of the initial and still potential problematic decisions: is it necessary, viable and appropriate to have a police officer or member of staff approach the family following the imprisonment?

Alternative responses

We had already explored the nature of the Information Sharing Agreement with HMPPS, and it was clear that it would be inappropriate to pass the names and details of affected children to any other agency without the consent of the remaining parent or primary caregiver (except for significant safeguarding concerns). This meant that we needed to resource appropriate colleagues to make the home visits.

We had considered exploring Children's Social Care (CSC) and other colleagues from Local Authorities. As well as being outside of the agreed ISA (INFORMATION SHARING AGREEMENT) parameters, there were concerns about the necessity for CSC involvement in many of the families' cases as well as fears that families might misinterpret the nature of CSC involvement and become fearful of statutory interventions solely based on the imprisonment.

As with much problem-solving policing activity, sufficient resources are not always available, and this was the case for Operation Paramount. The county of Oxfordshire is split into three Local Policing Areas, and we had already secured support from the police commander for the City of Oxford to base our initial trial there. We then had to present the proposed activity to various teams to establish the most appropriate colleagues to carry out the visits. We agreed that local neighbourhood teams would carry out the visits and arranged a series of training sessions where I presented the work alongside a representative from CHandS who explained their support offer so that officers could explain it properly on the visits.

Learning from our initial findings

Our initial recognition of police colleagues as the most appropriate agency to make the offer of support might have been wedded to the conditions of our ISA with HMPPS but it also represented a significant opportunity to intervene earlier to mitigate potential risk of future harm. Through our necessary focus on public health approaches and problem-solving principles, we recognised several potential benefits for the police including the development of trust and legitimacy for policing within families and communities that are impacted by offending, often those who are

seldom recognised or support such as the families of convicted sex offenders and those impacted by domestic abuse.

Forming our responses

We considered the threshold of involvement of other statutory agencies at length. On a few occasions, policing colleagues made assumptions about the level of existing Social Care involvement with families affected by parental imprisonment. Whilst this cohort does have associated risk of multi-agency involvement, there are many families who are still able to provide protective and suitable care for children. Just because a parent is imprisoned does not automatically mean that the remaining parent is unsuitable to adequately care for their children.

That said, we also knew that strategic agreement needed to be reached with our local authority colleagues as to a threshold for multi-agency reporting of the imprisonment. We agreed that in cases where we were aware that a child was open to statutory support or was open to “early help” colleagues that we would make the allocated social worker aware of the imprisonment.

This allowed us to share information to assist lawful safeguarding activity in cases where it was required and avoided us creating undue work for partner agencies.

Resourcing our response

Once we had established our local resource agreement and secured the support of CHandS, we soon realised that our initial plans were unduly complicated. We had initially agreed to send a notification to a centralised team within each LPA (Local Police Area) who would carry out officer safety checks on the address and then send the notification on to the local neighbourhood team to carry out the visit. This

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agreement also saw the local team updating the central LPA team of the result of the visit and the central team in turn updating us. This clearly led to an unnecessary point of failure as we were having to chase results from colleagues, and it was hard to follow the trail of notifications.

We then established a direct notification to the local neighbourhood team supervisor who would allocate the visit and the officer visiting would notify us directly. Whilst this was easier to monitor, we found that families were not accepting the offer of support made.

We have been very clear that not all families need or want additional support following parental imprisonment, and we have deliberately avoided using the acceptance of a referral to CHandS as a success measure for Operation Paramount. That said, it is clear that the human element of making this offer is sensitive and must be done with care and a recognition of the difficult circumstances that the family are in and of the part that policing has played in this.

We then identified local 'champions'; officers and police staff who are child-centred and trauma informed. These colleagues are all Safer Schools Officers and have an existing awareness of the harm of adversity and trauma and are experienced in speaking to children. Whilst fewer in number, these named officers, with the support of their supervisors, can accept a notification directly and can factor in a visit amongst their other workloads and can keep an appointment with the family as they are rarely redirected to other operational priorities.

Once we moved to a smaller number of officers and were able to directly task them, we found that families began to accept the offer of support more readily and we were able to replicate the model in other police areas.

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D. Assessment:

Since beginning this work, we have identified over 340 children living in the Thames Valley who were affected by the recent imprisonment of a parent. These are all individuals who were otherwise not “visible”, facing one of the most challenging periods of their childhood (and gaining a recognised risk factor) without any recognition. Our work means that, for the first time, organisations can proactively reach out an arm of support to families in the first few critical days, showing them that someone does care, and things will get better.

Our “problem” is by no means solved for good – we feel instead through our work we have shown how data can be used to help get support quickly in front of families, where previously there was none. There is still work to do – particularly on how we can improve our use of data to identify more young people and ensure none are left behind.

In the Thames Valley, 40 children who have been visited as part of Op Paramount have been directly referred to and are now receiving support from Children Heard and Seen. It is very possible that additional young children are receiving support – the nature of the project at the moment means a “referral” is completely voluntary and families may self-refer at any point.

We received the following case study from a young person who had been visited as part of Op Paramount:

“M” was referred to Children Heard and Seen (CHAS) through Operation Paramount in summer of 2022, aged 11. This was following his dad’s imprisonment for a violent offence, which was reported on locally.

M requires a high level of support due to his autism and ADHD. Due to his large physical size, his behaviour can be violent and threatening. On referral M had effectively been excluded from all SEN primary and secondary schools in Oxfordshire. His care plan lists 80+ behavioural incidents in a nine-month period, including several physical assaults on staff. Police were called to his home by Mum due to M destroying the house and threatening the family.

Following the Op Paramount visit, and subsequent referral to CHAS, M was invited to attend their annual summer camp, where they bring together young people affected by parental imprisonment for a fun weekend together. M attended, and mum reported on the first night M had woken her up twice because he was so excited to be there!

Since August 2022, CHAS have provided M with 17 weekly in-person sessions, around 50 hours of 1:1 support.

In September, M, Mum, and CHAS created a three point-plan:

- Sport and Socialisation: CHAS contacted the local boxing gym in his hometown, and M now attends twice a week. Coaches have said he “will be a great asset to the club”.*
- School: Mum is self-taught and does not use email. CHAS discussed this with the council and got M a more engaged special educational needs officer; together we are working to get M back into school after 10 months out.*
- Behaviour: M has been able to unpack his violent behaviour and its connection with his dad, his childhood, and how witnessing years of domestic violence has impacted him. During 1:1 sessions M’s behaviour has been*

exemplary; there has not been a single incident. At home, Mum has told CHAS that M “loves his sessions”, and that CHAS support has improved life for the whole family.

Expanding the pilot

Whilst still in the early stages of Operation Paramount we were approached by West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership (WMVRP) and Wales Violence Prevention Unit (WVPU), both of which are approaching public health methods and who were interested in exploring a parental imprisonment pilot.

We shared our data work and practical learning from our response stage and supported them both to roll out Paramount in their area. In September 2022, West Midlands began an initial trial. They are also utilising CHandS as their delivery partner but have allocated the offer visits to police officers who are already based in a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). These officers are carrying out the visits with a worker from CHandS who is on standby to talk to the family immediately if they consent to being introduced.

Early results from this approach are encouraging and we will be able to compare this to our local ‘champion’ model in due course.

South Wales are due to begin their pilot in December 2022 and we will also be able to compare this model with a further evaluation.

Further development of the process and the wider response to parental imprisonment

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Whilst (as outlined in the scanning and response sections) we believe there has been a good justification for the police to lead on this work up until this point, we feel there are significant opportunities for the police to withdraw from their current involvement in Op Paramount. It is likely that policing and criminal justice data may still be the best way of identifying children, however, we believe that with the appropriate data sharing agreements and protocols in place, it would be possible for the initial visits and support to be carried out directly by a charity or specialist youth worker.

We hope to explore this possibility during 2023, whilst continuing to provide this critical support for families.

Agency and Officer Information

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Agency

All involved officers/staff are employees of Thames Valley Police, a constabulary covering a population of 2.4 million people in the South East of England. They are seconded into the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit, a cross-partnership team created by the Home Office to tackle serious violence and knife crime across the Thames Valley.

Key Project Team Members:

Sgt Russ Massie is the force lead for Operation Paramount and carries out a number of the visits in the Thames Valley. He is also the principal contact with our charity partner Children Heard and Seen.

Owen Miller (civilian) is part of the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit's Data and Targeting team. He devised the data process to identify children affected by

parental imprisonment and works alongside Russ to roll out Op Paramount across other police force areas.

Detective Chief Inspector Lewis Prescott-Mayling is the Data and Targeting Lead for the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit. Lewis helped to coordinate the data sharing arrangements with the Ministry of Justice.

Partnership:

We are indebted to the following organisations and additional police forces for their support:

- Children Heard and Seen
- South Wales Police
- West Midlands Police/Violence Reduction Unit

Appendices (e.g., charts, tables, graphs, articles, letters)

To see more about Op Paramount and our work with Children Heard and Seen, please see this video, produced as part of our SARA assessment to promote good practice: [VRU long version on Vimeo](#)